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RUEHMO/AMEMBASSY MOSCOW 2173
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RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
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RUEIDN/DNI WASHINGTON DC
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 4875
RHMFISS/HQ USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 7018
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 NEW DELHI 002763

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [KDEM](#) [IN](#)

SUBJECT: INDIA'S PRESIDENTIAL RACE STILL WIDE OPEN

REF: NEW DELHI 2678

Classified By: PolCouns Ted Osius for reasons 1.4 (B,D)

¶1. (C) Summary: On June 13, the Indian Election Commission (EC) notified the Presidential election, stipulating that Presidential nominations must be filed by June 30. The election will occur on July 19 and the winner will be announced July 21. With the election imminent, the ruling United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government and the opposition National Democratic Alliance (NDA) have stepped up efforts to identify candidates and consolidate votes. The UPA continued to leak names of prospective candidates to the media to test the waters, the latest being that of Home Minister Shivraj Patil, while the NDA has coalesced around current Vice President Bhairon Singh Shekhawat (a Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) member, purportedly running as an independent). Having gained the support of Mayawati's Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), the UPA appears to have an unassailable majority, but still needs to convince the Left to sign on. Although Patil has Sonia Gandhi's support, pundits are deriding him as a "weak" candidate and warning that Congress is risking an embarrassing defeat if it backs him. End Summary.

Getting A Solid Majority

¶2. (SBU) To ensure a solid majority of electoral votes for its Presidential candidate, Congress needs the support of the Left and BSP. In a June 12 meeting, Congress Secretary Manish Tewari told PolOffs that the Left could sabotage the election process if it disapproves of the UPA candidate by telling its Members of Parliament (MPs) to "vote their conscience." Without the Left votes, the UPA candidate could lose -- a humiliating setback for Congress.

Congress Candidates Coming Out of the Woodwork

¶3. (C) On May 9, Congress released an initial list of three names: Minister of External Affairs, Pranab Mukherjee, Minister of Power, Sushilkumar Shinde, and MP/heir of the

Maharaja of Jammu & Kashmir, Karan Singh. After much behind the scenes machination, Congress backpedaled on Mukherjee, claiming he was too critical to the UPA and could not be spared. In a June 12 meeting with PolOff, Hindustan Times Political Editor Pankaj Vohra revealed that Sonia Gandhi and BSP leader Mayawati came up with five names: Sushilkumar Shinde, Karan Singh, Home Minister Shivraj Patil, Minister of Human Resources and Development, Arjun Singh and N.D. Tiwari, (a senior Congress leader and former Uttarakhand Chief Minister).

¶4. (C) Despite rumors that BSP leader Mayawati does not want a fellow Dalit to serve in a government post higher than her, Shinde remains in the running. The Left has rejected Karan Singh for his royal background and dismissed Patil as a "political lightweight" with "RSS (a Hindu right wing organization) connections." The Left additionally accused Patil of being an ineffective Home Minister who failed to prevent communal outbreaks in Karnataka and Uttar Pradesh in ¶2007. While most papers describe Patil as the UPA front-runner, Vohra did not discount the possibility of N.D. Tiwari coming up from behind.

Opposition Candidate Poses a Threat

¶5. (SBU) The NDA will not announce its candidate until the UPA has come forward. While speculation abounds on who Former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee will support, current Vice President Bhairon Singh Shekhawat remains the frontrunner. Shekhawat, running as an Independent candidate, continues to lobby MPs, and could upset Congress by

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attracting support from within the UPA and the Left.

¶6. (C) On June 13, PolCouns met with Congress Spokesperson Jayathni Natarajan, who characterized Shekhawat's bid for President as "ridiculous." Shekhawat is "amiable" and a "fine politician," but his support base, according to Natarajan, was "more exaggerated than fact." She expressed full faith that the Left and DMK would join forces with Congress and Sonia Gandhi's Presidential pick would prevail.

Congress: Lining Up Support

¶7. (C) Congress President Sonia Gandhi met with BSP leader Mayawati on June 11. The following day, Mayawati confirmed that she would support the UPA candidate. The Left continues to hold its cards close to the chest. Left leaders intended to meet with Dravida Munetra Kazagham (DMK) Tamil Nadu Chief Minister K. Karunanidhi on June 13 in an attempt to dissuade him from supporting Patil. However, Natarajan told PolCouns on June 13 that Karunanidhi was ill and unable to travel to Delhi. It is uncertain whether Karunandhi will make it to Delhi for talks. Karunanidhi and the Left both share an aversion to Patil, with the DMK Chief favoring Arjun Singh. The UPA leadership and the Left will continue to meet behind closed doors to select a consensus candidate and are expected to announce their decision within the next week.

The Newest Entrants

¶8. (C) Press reports that the recently formed "third front" of regional parties (reftel), spearheaded by former Chief Ministers J. Jayalalitha, Chandrababu Naidu, and Mulayam Singh Yadav plans to ask former Jammu and Kashmir Farooq Abdullah to be its candidate. However, he has not accepted the offer and remains noncommittal. Dwarfed by the NDA and UPA, the new front is unlikely to be able to sum up sufficient votes to make much of a difference in the race.

Comments

¶9. (C) Should Congress, its UPA partners, Mayawati and the Left agree on a consensus candidate, they should have the election sewed up, as they would enjoy an overwhelming majority. Neither the NDA nor the recently announced "third front" could even come close to posing a threat. The political cognoscente are speculating that Sonia Gandhi has a strong preference for Shivraj Patil, precisely because he is a political lightweight and poses no threat to the Gandhi dynasty. Should any of the Congress old guard such as Pranab Mukherjee, Arjun Singh or ND Tiwari be elevated to the Presidency, they would have their own power base, and could assert their independence and pose a potential threat to Sonia's plans to promote Rahul Gandhi as the heir apparent.

¶10. (C) The Left remains close to the Congress old guard and dismissive of Patil. In his meeting with Poloffs, Manish Tiwari expressed what he said were nagging fears within the Congress leadership that the Left could severely embarrass Sonia by sabotaging the contest. He opined that if Sonia refuses to relent and insists upon Patil, the Left would feel slighted and resentful and could urge MPs to vote for Shekawat rather than Patil. Since the Presidential balloting is secret, no one can determine how individual MPs and MLAs cast their vote. Under such a scenario, Congress could wake up to find Shekawat elected President of India. Much of the negotiation will go on behind closed doors, but it appears that Sonia's decision has many within Congress very nervous and they are urging her to think twice before sticking with Patil.
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